

Chapter 1

Cities and Civilization

Kevin Reilly

The West and the World: A History of Civilization, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 48-54, 56, 58, 60.

This selection from a college textbook is an obvious secondary source. You know it is a secondary source because it was written long after the events described by a modern historian – [Kevin Reilly].

From [the author's] perspective, this selection does two things. First, it explores the wide range of changes brought about by the urban revolution, from particulars like writing and money and metallurgy to abstractions like social class, visual acuity, and anonymity. After you read the selection, you might make a list of all the inventions and new phenomena of cities. You will like be surprised by the great number of ideas, institutions, and activities that originated in the first cities. You might also find it interesting to place pluses and minuses next to the items on your list to help you determine whether “civilization” (city life) was, on balance, beneficial or harmful.

Second, the selection compares the “civilizations” of Mesopotamia and Egypt. According to the selection, what are the chief differences between Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilization? What accounts for these differences?

The Urban Revolution: Civilization and Class

The full-scale urban revolution occurred not in the rain-watered lands that first turned some villages into cities, but in the potentially more productive river valleys of Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE. Situated along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, large villages like Eridu, Erech, Lagash, Kish, and later Ur and Babylon built irrigation systems that increased farm production enormously. Settlements like these were able to support five thousand, even ten thousand people, and still allow something like 10 percent of the inhabitants to work full-time at non-farming occupations.

A change of this scale was a revolution, certainly the most important revolution in human living since the invention of agriculture five thousand years earlier. The urban revolution was prepared by a whole series of technological inventions in agricultural society. Between 6000 and 3000 BCE people not only learned how to harness the power of oxen and the wind with the plow, the wheeled cart, and the sailboat; they also discovered the physical properties of metals, learned how to smelt copper and bronze, and began to work out a calendar based on the movements of the sun. River valleys like those of the Tigris and Euphrates were muddy swamps that had to be drained and irrigated to take advantage of the rich soil deposits. The dry land had literally to be build by teams of organized workers.

Therefore, cities required an organizational revolution that was every bit as important as the technological one. This was accomplished under the direction of the new class of rulers and managers – probably from the grasslands – who often treated the emerging cities as a conquered province. The work of irrigation itself allowed the rulers ample opportunity to coerce the inhabitants of these new cities. Rain knows no social distinctions. Irrigated water must be controlled and channeled.

It is no wonder then that the first cities gave us our first kings and our first class societies. In Mesopotamia, along the Nile of Egypt, in China, and later in Middle America, the king is usually

described as the founder of cities. These kings were able to endow their control with religious sanction. In Egypt and America the king was god. In Mesopotamia a new class of priests carried out the needs of the king's religion of control.

In some cities the new priesthood would appoint the king. In others, the priests were merely his lieutenants. When they were most loyal, their religion served to deify the king. The teachings of the new class of Mesopotamian priests, for instance, were that their god had created the people solely to work for the king and make his life easier. But even when the priesthood attempted to wrest some of the king's power from him, the priests taught the people to accept the divided society, which benefited king and priesthood as providers of a natural god-given order. The priesthood, after all, was responsible for measuring time, bounding space, and predicting seasonal events. The mastery of people was easy for those who controlled time and space.

The priesthood was only one of the new classes that insured the respectability of the warrior-chieftain turned king. Other palace intellectuals – scribes (or writers), doctors, magicians, and diviners – also struggled to maintain the king's prestige and manage his kingdom. This new class was rewarded, as were the priests, with leisure, status, and magnificent buildings, all of which further exalted the majesty of the king and his city.

Beneath the king, the priesthood, and the new class of intellectuals – managers was another new class charged with maintaining the king's law and order. Soldiers and police were also inventions of the first cities. Like the surrounding city wall, the king's military guard served a double function: it provided defense from outside attack and an obstacle to internal rebellion.

That these were the most important classes of city society can be seen from the physical remains of the first cities. The archeologist's spade has uncovered the monumental buildings of these classes in virtually all of the first cities. The palace, the temple, and the citadel (or fort) are indeed, the monuments that distinguish cities from villages. Further, the size of these buildings and the permanency of their construction (compared with the small, cheaply built homes of the farmers) attest to the fundamental class divisions of city society.

Civilization: Security and Variety

The most obvious achievements of the first civilizations are the monuments – the pyramids, temples, palaces, statues, and treasures – that were created for the new ruling class of kings, nobles, priests, and their officials. But civilized life is much more than the capacity to create monuments.

Civilized life is secure life. At the most basic level, this means security from the sudden destruction that village communities might suffer. Civilized life gives the feeling of permanence. I offer regularity, stability, order, even routine. Plans can be made. Expectations can be realized. People can be expected to act predictably, according to the rules.

The first cities were able to attain stability with walls that shielded the inhabitants from nomads and armies, with the first codes of law that defined human relationships, with police and officials who enforced the laws, and with institutions that functioned beyond the lives of their particular members. City life offered considerably more permanence and security than village life.

Civilization involves more than security, however. A city that provided only order would be more like a prison than a civilization. The first cities provided something that the best-ordered villages lacked. They provided far greater variety: More races and ethnic groups were speaking more languages, engaged in more occupations, and living a greater variety of lifestyles. The abundance of choice, the opportunities

1 for new sensations, new experiences, knowledge – these have always been the appeals of city life. The
2 opportunities for growth and enrichment were far greater than the possibilities of plow and pasture life.

3
4 Security plus variety equals creativity. At least the possibility of a more creative, expressive life
5 was available in the protected, semi-permanent city enclosures that drew, like magnets, foreign traders
6 and diplomats, new ideas about gods and nature, strange foods and customs, and the magicians, ministers,
7 and mercenaries of the king's court. Civilization is the enriched life that this dynamic urban setting
8 permitted and the human creativity and opportunity that it encouraged. Civilization is the enriched life
9 that this dynamic urban setting permitted and the human creativity and opportunity that it encouraged. At
10 the very least, cities made even the most common slave think and feel a greater range of things than the
11 tightly knit, clannish agricultural village allowed. That was (and still is) the root of innovation and
12 creativity - of civilization itself.

13
14 The variety of people and the complexity of city life required new and more general means of
15 communication. The villager knew everyone personally. Cities brought together people who often did not
16 even speak the same language. Not only law codes but written language itself became a way to bridge the
17 many gaps of human variety. Cities invented writing so that strangers could communicate, and so that
18 those communications could become permanent – remembered publicly, officially recorded. [Writer and
19 philosopher Ralph Waldo] Emerson was right when he said that the city lives by memory, but it was the
20 official memory that enabled the city to carry on its business or religion beyond the lifetime of the village
21 elders. Written symbols that everyone could recognize became the basis of laws, invention, education,
22 taxes, accounting, contracts, and obligations. In short, writing and records made it possible for each
23 generation to begin on the shoulders of its ancestors. Village life and knowledge often seemed to start
24 from scratch. Thus, cities cultivated not only memory and the past, but hopes and the future as well. City
25 civilizations invented not only history and record keeping but also prophecy and social planning.

26
27 Writing was one city invention that made more general communication possible. Money was
28 another. Money made it possible to deal with anyone just as an agreed-upon public language did.
29 Unnecessary in the village climate of mutual obligations, money was essential in the city society of
30 strangers. Such general media of communication as writing and money vastly increased the number of
31 things that could be said and thought, bought and sold. As a consequence, city life was more impersonal
32 than village life, but also more dynamic and more exciting.

33 34 *The "Eye" and "I"* 35

36 [Communication theorist] Marshall McLuhan has written that "civilization gave the barbarian and
37 eye for an ear." We might add that civilization also gave an "I" for an "us." City life made the "eye"
38 and the "I" more important than they had been in the village. The invention of writing made knowledge
39 more visual. The eye had to be trained to recognize the minute differences in letters and words. Eyes took
40 in a greater abundance of detail: laws, prices, the strange cloak of the foreigner, the odd type of shoes
41 made by the new craftsworker from who-knows-where, the colors of the fruit and vegetable market, and
42 elaborate painting in the temple, as well as the written word. In the village one learned by listening. In the
43 city, seeing was believing. In the new city courts of law an "eyewitness account" was believed to be more
44 reliable than "hearsay evidence." In some villages even today, the heard and the spoken are thought more
45 reliable than the written and the seen. In the city, even spoken language took on the uniformity and
46 absence of emotion that is unavoidable in the written word. Perhaps emotions themselves became less
47 violent. "Civilized" is always used to mean emotional restraint, control of the more violent passions, and
48 a greater understanding, even tolerance, of the different and foreign.

49
50 Perhaps empathy (the capacity to put yourself in someone else's shoes) increased in cities – so
51 full of so many different others that had to be understood. When a Turkish villager was recently asked,

1 “What would you do if you were president of your country?” he stammered: “My God! How can you ask
2 such a thing? How can I . . . I cannot . . . president of Turkey . . . master of the whole world?” He was
3 completely unable to imagine himself as president. It was as removed from his experience as if he were
4 master of the world. Similarly, a Lebanese villager who was asked what he would do if he were editor of
5 a newspaper, accused the interviewer of ridiculing him, and frantically waved the interviewer on to
6 another question. Such a life was beyond his comprehension. It was too foreign to imagine. The very
7 variety of city life must have increased the capacity of the lowest commoner to imagine, empathize,
8 sympathize, and criticize.
9

10 The oral culture of the village reinforced the accepted by saying and singing it almost
11 monotonously. The elders, the storytellers, and the minstrels must have had prodigious memories. But
12 their stories changed only gradually and slightly. The spoken word was sacred. To way it differently was
13 to change the truth. The written culture of cities taught “point of view.” An urban individual did not have
14 to remember everything. That was done permanently on paper. Knowledge became a recognition of
15 different interpretations and the capacity to look up things. The awareness of variety meant the possibility
16 of criticism, analysis, and an ever-newer synthesis. It is no wonder that the technical and scientific
17 knowledge of cities increased at a geometric rate compared with the knowledge of villages. The
18 multiplication of knowledge was implicit in the city’s demand to recognize difference and variety.
19 Civilization has come to mean that ever-expanding body of knowledge and skill. Its finest achievements
20 have been that knowledge, its writing, and its visual art. The city and civilization (like the child) are to be
21 seen and not heard.
22

23 It may seem strange to say that the impersonal life of cities contributed greatly to the
24 development of personality – the “I” as well as the “eye.” Village life was in a sense much more personal.
25 Everything was taken personally. Villagers deal with each other not as “the blacksmith,” “the baker,”
26 “that guy who owes me a goat,” or “that no-good bum.” They do not even “deal” with each other. They
27 know each other by name and family. They love, hate, support, and murder each other because of who
28 they are, because of personal feelings, because of personal and family responsibility. They have full,
29 varied relationships with each member of the village. They do not merely buy salt from this person, talk
30 about the weather with this other person, and discuss personal matters with only this other person. They
31 share too much with each other to divide up their relationships in that way.
32

33 City life is a life of separated, partial relationships. In a city you do not know about the butcher’s
34 life, wife, kids, and problems. You do not care. You are in a hurry. You have too many other things to do.
35 You might discuss the weather – but while he’s cutting. You came to buy meat. Many urban relationships
36 are like that. There are many business, trading, or “dealing” relationships because there are simply too
37 many people to know them all as relatives.
38

39 The impersonality of city life is a shame in a way. (It makes it easier to get mugged by someone
40 who does not even hate you.) But the luxurious variety of impersonal relationships (at least some of the
41 time) provides the freedom for the individual personality to emerge. Maybe that is why people have often
42 dreamed of leaving family and friends (usually for a city) in the hope of “finding themselves.” Certainly,
43 the camaraderie and community of village life had a darker side of surveillance and conformity. When
44 everything was known about everyone, it was difficult for the individual to find his or her individuality.
45 Family ties and village custom were often obstacles to asserting self-identity. The city offered its
46 inhabitants a he variety of possible relationships and personal identities. The urban inhabitant was freer
47 than his village cousin to choose friends, lovers, associates, occupation, housing, and lifestyle. The city
48 was full of choices that the village could not afford or condone. The village probably provided more
49 security in being like everyone else and doing what was expected. But the city provided the variety of
50 possibilities that could allow the individual to follow the “inner self” and cultivate inner gardens.
51

1 The class divisions of city society made it difficult for commoners to achieve an effective or
2 creative individuality. But the wealthy and powerful – especially the king – were able to develop models
3 of individuality and personality that were revolutionary. No one before had ever achieved such a sense of
4 the self, and the model of the king’s power and freedom became a goal for the rest of the society. The
5 luxury, leisure, and opportunity of the king was a revolutionary force. In contrast to a village elder, the
6 king could do whatever he wanted. Recognizing that, more and more city inhabitants asked, “Why can’t
7 we?” City revolutions have continually extended class privilege and opportunities ever since.

8
9 Once a society has achieved a level of abundance, once it can offer the technological means, the
10 education opportunities, the creative outlets necessary for everyone to lead meaningful, happy, healthy
11 lives, then classes may be a hindrance. Class divisions were, however, a definite stimulus to productivity
12 and creativity in the early city civilizations. The democratic villagers preferred stability to improvement.
13 As a result, their horizons were severely limited. They died early, lived precipitously, and suffered
14 without much hope. The rulers of the first cities discovered the possibilities of leisure, creation, and the
15 good life. They invented heaven and utopia – first for themselves. Only very gradually has the invention
16 of civilization, of human potential, sifted down to those beneath the ruling class. In many cases, luxury,
17 leisure, freedom, and opportunity are still the monopolies of the elite. But once the powerful have
18 exploited the poor enough to establish their own paradise on earth and their own immortality after death,
19 the poor also have broader horizons and plans.

20 21 *Mesopotamian and Egyptian Civilizations:* 22 *A Tale of Two Rivers* 23

24 Experts disagree as to whether Mesopotamian or Egyptian civilization is older. Mesopotamian
25 influence in Egypt was considerable enough to suggest slightly earlier origins, but both had evolved
26 distinct civilizations by 3000 BCE. Indeed, the difference between the two civilizations attests to the
27 existence of multiple routes to civilized life. In both cases, river valleys provided the necessary water and
28 silt for an agricultural surplus large enough to support classes of specialists who did not have to farm. But
29 the differing nature of the rivers had much to do with the different types of civilization that evolved.

30
31 The Egyptians were blessed with the easier and more reliable of the two rivers. The Nile
32 overflowed its banks predictably every year on the parched ground in the summer after August 15, the
33 harvest had been gathered, depositing its rich sediment, and withdrawing by early October, leaving little
34 salt or marsh, in time for the sowing of winter crops. Later sowings for summer crops required only
35 simple canals that tapped the river upstream and the natural drainage of the Nile Valley. Further,
36 transportation on the Nile was simplified by the fact that the prevailing winds blew from the north, while
37 the river flowed from the south, making navigation a matter of using sails upstream and dispensing with
38 them coming downstream.

39
40 The Euphrates offered none of these advantages as it cut its way through Mesopotamia. The
41 Euphrates flowed high above the flood plain (unlike its neighboring Tigris) so that its waters could be
42 used, but it flooded suddenly and without warning in the late spring, after the summer crops had been
43 sown and before the winter crops could be harvested. Thus, the flooding of the Euphrates offered no
44 natural irrigation. Its waters were needed at other times, and its flooding was destructive. Canals were
45 necessary to drain off water for irrigation when the river was low, and these canals had to be adequately
46 blocked, and the banks reinforced, when the river flooded. Further, since the Euphrates was not as easily
47 navigable as the Nile, the main canals had to serve as major transportation arteries as well.

48
49 In Mesopotamia, the flood was the enemy. The Mesopotamian deities who ruled the waters, Nin-
50 Girsu and Tiamat, were feared. The forces of nature were often evil. Life was a struggle. In Egypt, on the
51 other hand, life was viewed as a cooperation with nature. Even the Egyptian god of the flood, Hapi, was a

1 helpful deity, who provided the people's daily bread. Egyptian priests and philosophers were much more
2 at ease with their world than were their Mesopotamian counterparts. And, partly because of their different
3 experiences with their rivers, the Mesopotamians developed a civilization based on cities, while the
4 Egyptians did not. From the first Sumerian city-states on the lower Euphrates to the later northern
5 Mesopotamian capital of Babylon, civilization was the product and expression of city life. Egyptian
6 civilization, in contrast, was the creation of the pharaoh's court rather than of cities. Beyond the court,
7 which was moved from one location to another, Egypt remained a country of peasant villages.

8
9 A prime reason for Egypt's lack of urbanization was the ease of farming on the banks of the Nile.
10 Canal irrigation was a relatively simple process that did not demand much organization. Small market
11 towns were sufficient for the needs of the countryside. They housed artisans, shopkeepers, the priests of
12 the local temple, and the agents of the pharaoh, but they never swelled with a large middle class and never
13 developed large-scale industry or commerce.

14
15 In Sumer, and later in Mesopotamia, the enormous task of fighting the Euphrates required a
16 complex social organization with immediate local needs. Only communal labor could build and maintain
17 the network of subsidiary canals for irrigation and drainage. Constant supervision was necessary to keep
18 the canals free of silt, to remove salt deposits, to maintain the riverbanks at flood-time, and to prevent
19 any farmer from monopolizing the water in periods of drought. Life on the Euphrates required
20 cooperative work and responsibility that never ceased. It encouraged absolute, administrative control over
21 an area larger than the village, and it fostered participation and loyalty to an irrigated area smaller than the
22 imperial state. The city-state was the political answer to the economic problems of Sumer and
23 Mesopotamia.

24
25 The religious practices in the Euphrates Valley reflected and supported city organization.
26 Residents of each local area worshiped the local god while recognizing the existence of other local gods
27 in a larger Sumerian, and eventually Mesopotamian, pantheon of gods. The priests of the local temple
28 supervised canal work, the collection of taxes, and the storage of written records, as well as the proper
29 maintenance of religious rituals. Thus, religious loyalty reinforced civic loyalty. Peasant and middle-class
30 Sumerians thought of themselves as citizens of their particular city, worshipers of their particular city
31 god, subjects of their particular god's earthly representative, but not as Sumerian nationals. By contrast,
32 the Egyptian peasant was always an Egyptian, a subject of the pharaoh, but never a citizen.

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34 The local, civic orientation of Mesopotamian cities can be seen in the physical structure of the
35 capital city of Sumer, the city of Ur. Like other cities on the Euphrates, Ur was surrounded by a wall. It
36 was dominated by the temple of Nannar, the moon-god who owned the city, and the palace complex
37 beneath the temple. The residential areas were situated outside of the sacred Temenos, or temple
38 compound, but within the walls, between the river and the main canal. The well-excavated remains of Ur
39 of the seventeenth century BCE show a residential street plan that looks like many Middle Eastern cities
40 of today. A highly congested area of winding alleys and broad streets sheltered one- and two-story houses
41 of merchants, shopkeepers, tradespeople, and occasional priests and scribes that suggest a large, relatively
42 prosperous middle class. Most houses were built around a central courtyard that offered shade throughout
43 the day, with mud-brick, often even plastered, outside walls that protected a number of interior rooms from
44 the sun and the eyes of the tax inspector. The remains of seventeenth-century Ur show both the variety
45 and the density of modern city life. There are specialized districts throughout the city. Certain trades have
46 their special quarters: a bakers' square, probably special areas for the dyers, tanners, potters, and
47 metalworkers. But life is mixed together as well. Subsidiary gods have temples outside the Temenos.
48 Small and large houses are jumbled next to each other. There seems to be a slum area near the Temenos,
49 but there are small houses for workers, tenant farmers, and the poor throughout the city. And no shop or
50 urban professional is more than a short walking distance away. The entire size of the walled city was an
51 oval that extended three-quarters of a mile long and a half-mile wide.

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